

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK's Role in Strengthening Multilateral Organisations, HC 513

Tuesday 1 September 2020

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Chris Bryant; Alicia Kearns; Stewart Malcolm McDonald; Andrew Rosindell; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith; Graham Stringer; Claudia Webbe; Neil Coyle.

Questions 37-93

Witnesses

I: Lord Bowness, Vice-president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Chair of the Sub-Committee on Rules of Procedure and Working Practices, Member of Delegation, Conservative member of the House of Lords, Alex T Johnson, Chief of Staff of the U.S. Helsinki Commission for the 116th Congress, and Dr Neil Melvin, Director International Security Studies at the Royal United Services Institute.

II: Hon. Tony Abbott AC, 28th Prime Minister of Australia.

Written evidence from witnesses:

–Lord Bowness

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/9598/html/>

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Lord Bowness, Alex T Johnson, and Dr Neil Melvin.

Q37 **Chair:** Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Before we start the session, which begins with questions about the OSCE, I draw attention to my own entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and the role my father-in-law has played and continues to play in the organisation. May I ask the witnesses to introduce themselves with just a sentence? Lord Bowness, would you mind starting?

Lord Bowness: Thank you very much, Chair. I am a member of the House of Lords and I have been a member of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for a number of years. I am one of its vice-presidents and also chair an organisation looking at the way that Assembly works. I emphasise, of course, that the Assembly is different from the OSCE itself.

Dr Melvin: I am Neil Melvin, the director of international security studies at RUSI. I have also worked for the OSCE as a senior adviser in the office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities.

Alex T. Johnson: Thank you, Mr Chair. My name is Alex Johnson and I am the chief of staff of the US Helsinki Commission, formally known as the Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe. I manage the professional staff for our chairman, Alcee Hastings, a former president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and the 17 other commissioners from the US House and US Senate.

Q38 **Chair:** Thank you very much, and thank you for appearing at this early hour for you as well. Dr Melvin, can I start with you, please? What challenges is the OSCE facing today?

Dr Melvin: The OSCE is a long-standing organisation that comes out of the cold war and the CSCE process. It was set up as a consensus-based organisation, and the repository of Euro-Atlantic, rules-based European security. As a result of that legacy, the challenges it is facing are of immediate importance: namely, a series of crises around issues to do with leadership of the organisation—the failure to name one secretary general and three heads of institution—the ongoing situation around Belarus, and various issues to do with particular aspects of the organisation. Particularly notable are the military dimension, to do with arms issues and confidence-building across Europe, and issues to do with the human dimension, notably around freedom of the media and civil society organisations.

That all reflects the long-term structural problems that are affecting European security more broadly. Those are often associated with the breakdown of trust and confidence between Russia and the west and



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Russia's subsequent steps to violate a number of the key principles of the OSCE, namely territorial integrity, notably regarding the war with Georgia and, of course, the annexation of Crimea and Russia's involvement in the Donbass conflict. More broadly, we now begin to see other challenges to do with the rise of authoritarian politics among OSCE-participating states. The breakdown of the consensus around the leadership replacement was led initially by Azerbaijan objecting. Turkey came in, objecting to the head of ODIHR being replaced, and Tajikistan and others, so a broader challenge is now emerging around a lack of consensus on values.

In the long term, we have ongoing crises emerging even in the east Mediterranean, which may have an impact as Turkey begins to move away from the western community in some dimensions. All these are starting to come together, and of course the OSCE is at the centre of that, because it is a consensus-based organisation. That is its strength, but when there is a lack of consensus, the organisation faces substantial fractures and challenges in advancing its agenda.

Q39 Chair: This raises huge issues, because the current stresses that are particularly obvious within the OSCE are the two issues that you mentioned: Belarus and the Donbass. Both of them in some way, either directly or indirectly, are connected to Russian influence in eastern Europe and what could be summarised as a challenge of values, if you like, or an authoritarian versus a democratic view of Europe. How do you see the OSCE being able to resolve these challenges?

Dr Melvin: The OSCE is in a difficult situation now, and it is quite hard for the OSCE to resolve those issues. What it can do is help to mediate and facilitate avoidance of worse scenarios. The OSCE struggles to build trust on its own. It can contribute to a trust-building process reflecting its values around transparency and predictability in security relations but the trust itself will probably have to come from relations between participating states.

Nonetheless, it can play an important role in a number of areas. We see in Belarus that ultimately a peaceful and durable solution to the Belarus crisis that is acceptable to Russia but also to the Euro-Atlantic community would have to involve the OSCE playing a role in verifying and monitoring the election process, ensuring that prisoners are released and journalists themselves are not being harassed. We have seen over the weekend that Belarus is taking steps here. The OSCE Freedom of the Media Office has noted this and the chairman in office has raised concerns about this issue.

All these steps show the way forward, but the OSCE on its own will not be able to deliver necessarily. That is why it is also important that countries like the UK and its European allies and the United States are supporting this process that the OSCE needs to stop other alternatives emerging in bilateral or unilateral action by Russia and its allies.

We also see in Ukraine that the special monitoring mission that the OSCE has been running on the Donbass has been very important in areas such as prisoner release, in monitoring where Russia is violating the OSCE



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principles. In recent times, we have also seen the OSCE playing a role in negotiating a ceasefire which is not perfect, but the amount of violence has been reduced quite significantly as a result of this ceasefire. These are all important steps that the OSCE offers and can contribute to a trust-based return to consensus-based European security at the moment that Russia is willing actually to follow that path.

Chair: Stewart McDonald, you wanted to ask about Russian involvement in the Donbass and the OSCE mission.

Q40 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Yes, thank you Chair. It strikes me as a curious thing that Russia can be part of the monitoring mission in Ukraine when it is the aggressor state in Ukraine. Does that not strike you as strange?

Dr Melvin: Well, Russia also has an interest in a certain level of stability in European security and the OSCE is the way to regulate that. Russia is part of a number of different conflict regulation mechanisms that are either primarily OSCE or OSCE-related. I would also mention the Minsk process around Nagorno-Karabakh, which Russia is active in. Russia's main interest in these issues is using the conflict in Ukraine to advance its own interests, but that interest is not in having a fully-blown conflict that emerges even as a war.

The monitoring process that the OSCE does is an important regulator and, as you rightly say, Russia has supported that. It would not have been possible to have that OSCE process unless there was consensus and Russia has consistently been on board in that. I think that reflects that the OSCE itself is also valuable for Russia. It means that Russia has to be committed to maintaining a degree of stability, but also it means that Russia can be held accountable to the OSCE where it violates those principles.

Q41 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** The OSCE probably would not be in Ukraine if it were not for Russia.

Dr Melvin: Absolutely. In various ways, the OSCE has been involved in Ukraine since the end of the Soviet Union, but in terms of its monitoring mission, you are absolutely right. Of course, the OSCE also does things like conflict prevention, early warning, building up long-term security and trust. There has been an office in Kiev for many years. There was also an office in Crimea until that was closed down primarily by Ukrainian initiative, in fact. The OSCE is not just crisis management, but also long-term trust-based confidence building kinds of initiatives which are important across the region.

Q42 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I take your point and you are of course correct in terms of the presence outwith the Donbass war. Is there a mechanism to remove a member of the OSCE from a special monitoring mission or to deny them access to be part of a special monitoring mission? Forgive me, I do not know.

Dr Melvin: It would be impossible to do that because of the consensus-based principle. Every country has a veto so if a country felt that it was



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being put in that position, it would then take steps to do that. The value of the OSCE is not really in excluding states. It is about finding ways to bring them on board and keep them part of a dialogue. That is its strength. Of course, it is frustrating when we lack the consensus in Europe on these issues but the risk of excluding a state—particularly a state such as Russia—is what they would do if they were outside. It is quite likely that we would then continue to see Russia act as it has and perhaps in worse ways and beginning to act in a style of politics that is a return to the 19th century, with big powers pushing their neighbours round. The OSCE does provide a buffer to some degree. I would underline, again, that it is an imperfect buffer but nonetheless—given where we are at the moment—it is probably important to try and keep Russia in that particular framework.

- Q43 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I get that these things are not simple and are certainly not black and white. I appreciate that entirely, and you are correct. Most people would find it odd that Russia gets to be both the aggressor and, perversely, pretend that it is the peacemaker in the special monitoring mission on the ground. Is there a broader danger that the OSCE, particularly in terms of the Ukraine monitoring mission, becomes captured by that Russian veto?

Dr Melvin: This is where it is important to have a country like the UK holding Russia to account and making sure that there is no sort of funny business around mandates in the way these operations can turn out. There has often been a declining interest in western capitals in the OSCE, and that is something to consider. That allows Russia and its allies a disproportionate role. To some degree, the breakdown we saw over the summer in terms of the leadership issue in the OSCE was also because the West was not paying sufficient attention to these issues. That opens up space for Russia and others to come in, and now we are going to see a terrible battle over who will be the new heads of these institutions, and whether that will mean that Russia and others want to start changing the mandate and opening the mandates, or limiting the freedoms that are fundamental to the way that the ODIHR and the Freedom of the Media offices operate as well as the High Commissioner on National Minorities. A peculiarity of the organisation is that Russia often has a veto while being able to manipulate the situation on the ground. In the past, that was why the UK, the Europeans and the North Americans and others have needed to work effectively and use diplomacy to make sure that Russia was not able to do that, while also bringing Russia to account in the Permanent Council and elsewhere.

- Q44 Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Tell me if I am wrong in this, but the OSCE has a provision of consensus minus one. Is that right?

Dr Melvin: Yes.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Talk me through when you might use that provision. Talk me through the ball you would kick around in trying to decide whether you might use that to keep Russia on board, or when you might consider that it becomes too problematic.



Dr Melvin: One of the problems would be that in the OSCE, consensus minus one works when it is just one, but Russia would have its own supporters who would be able to block that quite convincingly. Of course, it would be Belarus and other members of its alliance system. We also see significant division even within the European side, with some European states keen to use the OSCE to bring Russia back to a kind of business as normal discussion. We have seen that around issues to do with arms control, and discussions about a so-called structured dialogue around threat perception. Most recently, we have seen President Macron strategically arguing that there should be an engagement with Russia. There would be no ability to exclude Russia politically, because it would not just be Russia that would block that approach.

Even raising that issue would risk running a deeper division among the Europeans on how to handle Russia. The UK has been in quite a successful group within the OSCE that has allowed dialogue to proceed with Russia but ensured that it does not cross any red lines, and that it is reminded of its commitments to the OSCE throughout those processes. There is a structured outreach to Russia in the OSCE that is carefully contained. If we were to go down the other road, you would risk breaking apart a wider consensus about how to handle Russia.

Q45 **Royston Smith:** Lord Bowness, we are talking about strengthening multilateral organisations and about interference in them. What would you say are the distinctive strengths and unique selling points of the OSCE? Not in relation to Ukraine and Russia, which Stewart has just been talking about, but in general, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the OSCE?

Lord Bowness: Thank you, Mr Smith, for the question. Can I just say, Chair, how much I appreciate the fact that your Committee is looking at the OSCE? It has suffered from a lack of attention for a very long time.

The strengths and advantages of an organisation of this kind were, if I may say so, very well set out by Dr Melvin. I am firmly of the opinion that if the OSCE did not exist, we should have to invent it. Whether we would invent it with a consensus rule, however, is another matter. I say to you and Mr McDonald that consensus minus one has been used only once, and that was in the break-up of Yugoslavia crisis, when it was agreed that Yugoslavia, or what remained of it, could not stop the action.

I believe that what is really needed is a big effort on the part of Western Governments—and our own, if I may say so—to raise the profile of the OSCE and give it much more priority than I perceive it has been given over the years. I have been a member of the Parliamentary Assembly since 2015—no, I have forgotten how long I have been there, but it is a long time. It is quite clear to me that the OSCE does not rank very highly on the list of priorities for any Government of any persuasion.

I will give you some examples of where I think we go wrong. It was not until there was a summit in Astana that the Foreign Office was persuaded to issue a ministerial statement on the outcome of that summit. It has



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slipped a bit, but we now have a commitment, as a Parliamentary Assembly delegation, from the Foreign Office to make sure we get a statement of what happens at each ministerial council. Now, the ministerial councils are not always very successful, but the fact of the matter is that on occasion some of the delegations from some of the countries—particularly the US and Russia—are really high-level, and there must be valuable discussions in the margins.

The other thing that is indicative of the lack of interest, if I can put it that way, is that there is a provision for the OSCE to hold summits. The chair-in-office of the OSCE is always the Foreign Minister of the country concerned. The last summit with Heads of government was held in Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2010. There has not been a summit since, but it seems quite inconceivable that none of the leaders of the Western allies has thought it worthwhile to seek to hold another summit. It is 10 years since we have had a summit, and the organisation has carried on having its ministerial meetings. Those who have been will know, but the last time I looked, it was 67 written statements from those representing the participating states and the associates—the partnerships we have with Mediterranean countries and elsewhere—but nothing really from Heads of Government. I find it extraordinary that we have heard almost nothing about Belarus and the suggested intervention of the OSCE from our Government. I have seen a statement that said simply that the OSCE should look at verifying any further elections, but in terms of an initiative—I hope I am not wrong, and I hope I have not missed it—it does not seem to me that we are up there in the forefront of all this activity to make the OSCE do anything.

- Q46 **Royston Smith:** It is interesting: you paint a picture, Lord Bowness, of an organisation that carries on successfully in your opinion, and that of others I am sure, but it is not even on the radar of the European leaders and others who sit on it. Why do you think that is? If we were pointing at just the UK Government, that would be one criticism. When you look at the member states of the OSCE and think that none of the leaders of those countries seems particularly interested, in the way that you describe, why do you think that is?

Lord Bowness: It is difficult to say. You are asking me to read people's minds. Maybe they don't see there is enough in it from a publicity or a political point of view, but the fact of the matter is that you have an organisation that is doing incredibly important work in terms of its various activities on the ground. It is not an overblown organisation; I think the last time I looked, 55% or more of its expenditure goes on field missions, where great work is being done. If you go to any of those field missions, you will see people helping to train the judiciary and the police—how they control the border, anti-terrorism and arms control. The thing is, it's all very worthy work, but it perhaps does not make political headlines. It seems to me that we are in danger, due to a lack of political leadership, of allowing an organisation that is doing incredibly good work on the ground—served by very devoted people—to lose sight of its role, or to allow people to start thinking that they would be more interested



elsewhere. As you rightly say, I am not directing this solely to the United Kingdom. Indeed, my position as a Member of the Assembly is, in a sense, merely an observer, both of our Government and of other Governments. But it does not seem to me to be a top priority for us in terms of a profile within the OSCE, and without political leadership—real political leadership—an organisation of this kind will always find itself in difficulty, however worthy the work and however diligently its objectives are pursued by those on the ground.

- Q47 **Bob Seely:** Just two or three quick questions, if I could. I want to go back to something that Dr Melvin said about Russia, slightly to support what our colleague was asking. Doctor, Russia manages the stability or instability in its neighbouring states, depending how much chaos it wants to impose. This is the managed stability theory of how Russia undermines former Soviet territories around it. You said that if we didn't have the OSCE and other international institutions, Russia would go back to pushing its neighbours around. That is sort of what it does anyway, and the only reason it doesn't invade countries is not necessarily because of the OSCE—valuable work though I am sure it does—but because offensive warfare has pretty much become internationally illegal since 1945. Could I have your comment on that, please?

Dr Melvin: What you say is broadly correct. The OSCE is not a deterrent organisation. The UK of course relies upon NATO and its military forces for deterrence, and the OSCE cannot play that role. The OSCE is the repository of shared commitments, which Russia also entered into, and which can be monitored and reported on through the OSCE. Of course, this is an embarrassment to Russia, quite often.

I would say that, perhaps going back to the previous point, Russia does engage in the OSCE. It regularly sends its Foreign Minister to the ministerial events. It has its high-level diplomats working through the OSCE because it knows the value of that organisation, but we have rather lost sight of that on the Western side—perhaps because things were going rather well for us for two decades. The advance of democracy, human rights and rule of law was proceeding fairly successfully, and we took for granted, I think, many of the values that are at the heart of the OSCE.

Of course, this is the comprehensive notion of security. It is precisely because the Russians are afraid of that that they try to undermine the OSCE and subvert its various institutions. My warning from this call today would be, also, that if there is pressure now to put someone from east of Vienna into one of the OSCE offices, to start to do inquiries into Western Europe and make reports and change mandates, I think quite quickly we will become aware of many of the parts of the OSCE that we weren't aware of before, because they will start to be used against democratic regimes in very unfortunate ways. So, I would underline what the previous speaker highlighted—that we need to reinvest in the OSCE. The UK, now it has left the European Union, perhaps has a unique voice. I would say that one of the things that did hold back the UK, to some degree, was the need to co-ordinate with the EU. The UK and other European states, when they



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agreed on issues, had a very powerful voice, but too often perhaps they also followed the consensus principle internally.

- Q48 **Bob Seely:** That seems to be an important point you're trying to make there, which is, first, that we have freedom to speak out in a way that we didn't when we were in the European Union but we're potentially not doing so, and, secondly, that Russia sees the value of the organisation in the sense that it sees the potential threat it has, which is why it seems to be very keen to undermine any unity within it. Would that be correct?

Dr Melvin: Absolutely. The UK could really take a stronger leadership role in challenging Russia on some of these issues and preventing it from playing the role that you are saying, which is having its cake and eating it. It is destabilising Europe and then using, or trying to manipulate, the OSCE to turn these into frozen conflicts.

- Q49 **Bob Seely:** Brilliant. On one of the tactics, Russia has form in using ceasefires to recalibrate, so not really using ceasefires to their purpose, which is to cease fighting, but to rearm and to rest its forces. It did so in Abkhazia in back in the 1990s and it has potentially done so in Ukraine and in other conflicts. Do you think that the ceasefire that Russia has entered into—its forces and its proxies in eastern Ukraine—is genuine, or do your people on the ground, who I've met before and who I think highly of, see this as a way for Russia to recalibrate, resupply and re-entrench its forces in the Donbass and in eastern Ukraine more generally?

Dr Melvin: I think you have to look at all Russia's military actions in its neighbourhood as part of a broader political strategy. The fact that there is less violence at the moment is because Russia feels there is an opportunity in Ukraine to push a political settlement that would be to its advantage—namely, that it would look to federalise Ukraine and entrench a veto, through its proxies in the Donbass, on Ukraine's ability or aspiration to join NATO and pursue an independent foreign policy. So, I do not think we can take the ceasefire as part of a long-term commitment by Russia to moving away from violence in Ukraine, but rather as part of that political strategy. Again, I think this is why the UK has an important voice. We, for whatever reason, elected not to be part of the Normandy Format, so we have now lost our voice on the diplomacy taking place involving Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany. I think this highlights that if we take our eye off the ball on the East, we end up being outside the conflict settlement processes.

- Q50 **Bob Seely:** A federal agenda is potentially very dangerous for Ukraine, because the Russians could slice off county by county in the east. Do you think that, if Russia does not get its way with a federal process, you will see an uptick in violence because the Russians will say, "Well, if we don't get what we want, here's another round of the war."?

Dr Melvin: We are part of this negotiating process at the moment, but I think that is precisely what would happen if things began to go the other way: they would further entrench their position in Donbass. I would say that is not just through military means; they have also been extending



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Russian passports to hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians, so they have extended Russian citizenship extraterritorially into the Donbass, which, as we have seen in other places in the former Soviet Union, can then be used to claim a right to intervene to protect citizens abroad. So, it is not a frozen conflict at all in the east; it is constantly moving, and it requires that we keep an eye on all these different activities that the Russians are doing. They have their top people on it—their top negotiators who have been through Moldova, been through the war in Chechnya and done the Georgia conflict—so they know these processes inside out.

- Q51 Bob Seely:** Finally—this question is for either of you—apart from saying the FCO could do better and the UK could do multilateral institutions better, what would you specifically recommend to improve our influence in multilateral institutions, or indeed the OSCE specifically?

Alex T Johnson: Thank you so much for that question, Mr Seely. I think it would be a tremendous opportunity to renew investment, as both Dr Melvin and Lord Bowness called for, in terms of the organisation. Part of that has already been done. In March this year, the UK offered €1 million to the special monitoring mission in Ukraine, which should be applauded. That investment gives you a voice to ensure that you counter the malign influence of states such as Russia and others.

Going back to the leadership question that Dr Melvin started with, one of the biggest challenges is recruitment for the heads of institution and the secretary-general. One of the best ways to respond to the challenges currently facing people with respect to the leadership crisis would be to have a sustained recruitment model where you are identifying senior experts from the UK, as well as third countries, who could be ready to fill these roles and would be able to pass the consensus threshold for agreement. Right now, of course, there are a number of negotiations to identify candidates that will be key, as well as working to disaggregate the timeline of having all these mandates expire at once. They should be managed not in terms of a package deal, but to afford the opportunity for the talent that exists in the UK and elsewhere to be in leadership roles in these organisations. So, there should be investing with extra budgetary funds, sustained recruitment and maintaining an active leadership voice, especially in terms of some of the working groups that exist around certain policy questions on the margins of the permanent council in Vienna.

Bob Seely: Thank you.

- Q52 Chris Bryant:** Thanks very much to all our witnesses. We seem to be developing quite a Manichean principle here, which is that the Russians are evil and everybody else is more or less okay unless they are underneath the Russian sphere of influence. Would you like to tease that out a bit more? Mr Johnson, from your perspective, is that fair? Or are there other countries that play the system for all it is worth as well?

Alex T Johnson: I would say that there are a number of countries that, recently, even in terms of this leadership crisis, have withheld consensus or been disruptive in their activities. For years, one of the things Lord



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Bowness raised was the importance of field operations in the OSCE. There has been a consistent erosion, where field operations would be effective and needed but some host Governments have sought to remove them from their countries, such as Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has been very active in undermining consensus on human dimension commitments and convening of key events within the human dimension event cycle. Additionally, Turkey has been very active in withholding consensus. One of the greatest challenges of the OSCE right now is that there is not the degree of transparency in proceedings and negotiations whereby the journal of the day, for example, is not published in a public way to show which countries are withholding consensus. It is a much broader orbit. We have seen a number of other countries active, in addition to Russia, for very different domestic political reasons of their own.

Q53 Chris Bryant: Presumably to change that system of what is made public and what is kept private, you have to get consensus.

Alex T Johnson: Indeed. There are some ways that you could still increase the transparency of proceedings. Lord Bowness and others have been in the lead within the OSCE parliamentary assembly in calling for this among OSCE institutions. That would be ensuring the Permanent Council proceedings are more public and that there are more records. Also, there are some administrative fixes that do not require consensus, including restoring the archiving system for documents published within the human dimension event cycle. The largest meeting in that cycle, the human dimension implementation meeting, for two weeks every year, used to publish its proceedings for well over a decade for all the civil society contributions, as well as Government statements. Those are no longer readily available for browsing. You have to specifically request certain statements. There are some administrative fixes, but also some consensus fixes that will need to be undertaken to ensure that accessibility and to counter malign influence.

Q54 Graham Stringer: My apologies if these questions have been asked before, but I had a technical problem at the start of the meeting, so I did not hear everything. I come back to Lord Bowness, who said that if the OSCE were not there, it would have to be invented. Can he expand on that? Would we miss the OSCE if it weren't there?

Lord Bowness: Thank you, Mr Stringer, for the question. My point is that this is, as it describes itself, the largest regional organisation in the world. It stretches from Vancouver to Vladivostok. It has 57 countries. It has the United States and Russia as members. That in itself is valuable for many of the reasons given by my colleague witnesses this afternoon. It does mean that we are all members of an organisation that, at least in theory, subscribes to the same aims and objects. Were we to have a different security structure in Europe, it seems to me there would be no guarantee that all those different interests would want to be part of that or, indeed, that there would be any agreement as to the form.

At least we have the OSCE carrying out the work that you refer to and that I referred to earlier—the various field missions. The weekly meetings of

the permanent council, bringing the permanent representatives of all participating member states together, are valuable, however frustrating they may actually be from time to time.

I do not believe that changing the organisation by founding something new is the answer. The fact that it needs some kind of reform is self-evident, given the situations in which we find ourselves today, with none of the four executive heads in office, everything being run by deputies appointed by the chairman-in-office and no guarantee that, come 18 September, when the applications for those jobs are concluded and considered, there will be any agreement on who should take those places. At the risk of repeating myself, I think we need to come back to trying to establish some real, high-level political leadership on this. It seems to me that Heads of Government need to talk to each other about the situation in which we find ourselves, how we are going to solve it and whether there are ways of nuancing the consensus arrangements for the future. It cannot just be left to the institution itself; the Heads of Government have to take a real interest.

Part of their taking a real interest is their ensuring that Parliament understands and knows what is going on in the OSCE. I can only speak for Westminster, but it is probably true to say that knowledge of the OSCE is not very wide throughout the whole of the Palace of Westminster, and I do not think that we are alone in that, having talked to other colleagues from other countries. In the United States, you have the Helsinki Commission—Mr Johnson is with you this afternoon—which enables the Helsinki process and OSCE itself to actually maintain quite a high profile, as I understand it, within the United States and United States politics. I do not think any Western country has the same, whereas we are always told about Russia manipulating the system, from the point of view of the parliamentary assembly, and you can see that because their instruction runs to that organisation too, and they will change their delegations to ensure that they have the right people at the right level at various meetings. Very keen interest is taken elsewhere, but not necessarily in Western capitals.

Graham Stringer: Thank you. Can I just ask one more question to Dr Melvin, if I may? I apologise if this question has been asked before.

Chair: Mr Johnson wants to come in and add to that last question.

Alex T Johnson: Thank you so much. To add briefly to Mr Stringer's question, I actually joined the US delegation to the Astana summit in 2010, and at that period there was this sense that the post-cold war role of the OSCE was diminishing, and there was interest in whether or not the organisation would continue. In 2014, the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine and the purported annexation of Crimea and other challenges actually demonstrated that it was an insurance policy. The OSCE operates in such a unique, nimble way that it was able to field the special monitoring mission rapidly, as well as to provide capabilities on the ground that were not afforded easily by other international organisations. I agree with the assessment that it would need to be invented if it did not already



exist, and it is a worthwhile investment to maintain as an insurance policy for other conflicts and challenges that may emerge.

- Q55 **Graham Stringer:** Thank you. Dr Melvin, when members are being disruptive, as they undoubtedly are, what is the best way of dealing with that? Can you give any examples of success and effectiveness in dealing with members who are not really abiding by the spirit or the actual rules of the organisation?

Dr Melvin: The consensus principle means it is often quite difficult to formally discipline people. Even when Russia has violated the founding principle of territorial integrity in Europe on a number of occasions, it has not been possible through the OSCE to discipline it. What the OSCE can do is monitor, collect information and provide accountability when those violations happen. The OSCE has to be seen in the context of a wider Russia strategy from the UK point of view. Issues around deterrence, of course, are handled by NATO, and the OSCE's fundamental value is in retaining support for those shared rules-based ways of approaching co-operative security and then holding Russia accountable in that regard.

I want to link into this issue of reform of the OSCE, which has just come up. There have been various discussions around this. I would caution against reform of the organisation because, in the OSCE itself, the institutions are there, the mandates are there, and the principles are agreed by all. There are some areas where you could argue that there is a need for modernisation. The UK has been playing an important role in, for example, modernising the Vienna document, which is a very important military risk management document. In putting pressure on Russia to agree to those things, you are highlighting the fact that Russia is, if not violating the Vienna document, certainly working against the spirit of it in the way that it organises its military exercises, snap exercises, and exercises very close to the border with Ukraine and other participating states.

To open up the reform agenda risks a discussion about actually creating an international organisation, which the OSCE is not. It hovers between a conference and an international organisation. Russia would like the OSCE to become an international organisation because that would entrench its position. I think we should avoid those kinds of discussions. It is more about holding Russia to the commitments that it has entered into in the Helsinki final act and in the charter of Paris agreement and other documents, such as the Copenhagen document, and linking human dimension issues—democracy and human rights—to security, which it wants to decouple at the moment. The reform process would risk giving up on some of those issues in another discussion.

- Q56 **Claudia Webbe:** I just wanted to come in on the issue of election monitoring. Lord Bowness, how could the Foreign and Commonwealth Office turn its approach to providing personnel for election monitoring and field missions to help ensure it has the right personnel at every level? Chair, I should have declared that I am an OSCE parliamentary assembly delegate.



Lord Bowness: Thank you very much. You will know, as a member of the parliamentary assembly delegation, that that is a large part of the parliamentary assembly's work, but we only provide short-term monitors. You will know that most elections are on Sundays, and most of the parliamentary monitors go for briefing on the Thursday or Friday and stay for the various press conferences on the Monday. I am not sure—when you are talking about the Foreign Office providing election monitors, I presume that you are talking about secondees from the Foreign Office to organisations like ODIHR. There is obviously a role for the UK to make much greater use of financing secondees at various levels, particularly in the field missions where we would have a particular interest in having people in place. I don't know that we actually financed that many secondees. Overall, I think it was something like six last time I looked, but that is not a figure I would like to have quoted against me.

Clearly, in the interests of the OSCE, if the FCO were able to supply and fund people who could act through ODIHR as long-term observers—and particularly in the missions—that would be particularly helpful. Of course, we are always constrained by budgets, and in all the years that I have been involved, the Foreign Office has been very keen to ensure that the budget of the OSCE did not go up. But as I say, more than half of it goes on field missions anyway, and if we are concerned about contributing to the budget itself, a way of supporting the organisation is through secondees, as I think you are suggesting. I hope that answers your question.

Q57 **Claudia Webbe:** If I can go a bit further, in terms of ensuring free and fair elections, how effective are election monitoring processes?

Lord Bowness: That is very difficult. Clearly, ODIHR puts a great deal of effort into providing checklists for monitors—certainly for short-term monitors—as to what they should be looking for right from the arrangements before the actual opening and closing of the poll and the count. I think the long-term mission observers of course have even greater value, because although parliamentarians may be there on the ground and have the experience of being elected officials and so on, the fact of the matter is that long-term monitors who are there for a couple of months before a poll can see how the opposition have the opportunity to hold meetings and what the control—or otherwise—of the press is like. That is particularly valuable, and on balance, I do not think that anyone has suggested that the international monitors have got anything particularly wrong in their observations at the end. The monitoring is co-ordinated by somebody from the parliamentary assembly. Of the long-term monitors, there is not only ODIHR, but the monitors from other parliamentary institutions.

In parenthesis on this point, in a sense, I think that what we need to avoid, and which unfortunately does happen, is people being recruited by the country concerned to act as observers for elections who do not subscribe to the standards of the OSCE or the OSCE parliamentary assembly. Although the country invites OSCE and the parliamentary assembly to send observers, that is quite different to the country



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concerned inviting individual members to go and be observers for their elections. That is something that the organisation needs to resist. Mr Johnson, from the point of view of the Helsinki Commission, may have a different view.

Alex T Johnson: Thank you so much for that question, Ms Webbe. Election observation has been tremendously effective throughout the OSCE region. It really varies depending on which country is being observed. Election monitors have actually been able to expose a number of forms of corruption in such elections. I myself have observed seven across the region, including in 2010 in Azerbaijan, where I personally witnessed ballot box stuffing. Election observation offers an opportunity to expose some of those practises in more contested political spaces and affords a degree of protection for political pluralism in contexts such as Belarus, where there was not, in the recent election, an effective full monitoring mission. Thus, there were many other political manoeuvres available to the existing leadership to stifle political pluralism and the opportunity for people to raise their voice in that election. From the perspective of the US and the experts at the commission, we find it to be an essential function and one of the jewels in the crown of the OSCE's capabilities.

Chair: I thank all three witnesses for their perspectives. It was hugely informative and extremely useful. We will now move on to the second element of our Foreign Affairs Committee session. On behalf of the Committee, I thank Lord Bowness, Dr Melvin and Mr Johnson.

Examination of Witness

Witness: Tony Abbott.

Q58 **Chair:** I now welcome the 28th Prime Minister of Australia, the hon. Tony Abbott, who has kindly joined us this afternoon to talk about multilaterals, a subject on which he is uniquely skilled to answer questions. I hope he will forgive us if we spend 10 minutes—I will limit it to 10 minutes—on the new post he holds on behalf of the British people. We will keep it strictly to 10 minutes and then come back to the point that Mr Abbott kindly agreed to speak to us on.

Tony Abbott: Thank you, Tom. It is nice to be with you. I trust that the technology is working and that you can hear me and see me.

Chair: It is working perfectly. Good to have you with us.

Tony Abbott: I cannot see you, but I can hear you loud and clear. I am not sure that there is a lot that I can say on this story that appeared in *The Sun* last week. Yes, I have had some discussions with members of the British Government, and I am more than happy to help, but there is nothing official as yet.

All I can say at this time is that, as far as I am concerned, it would be in the interest of both Britain and Australia to conclude a full and comprehensive free trade deal between our two countries as quickly as possible, involving essentially zero tariffs and quotas on goods, mutual recognition of standards and qualifications and free movement of people, perhaps subject to some kind of an annual quota, for work, not welfare. Speaking generally, freer trade between countries with comparable standards of living and like-mindedness will certainly be in the interests of those countries and the interest of the wider world. But I am not sure how much more specific I can be, given that, as I say, nothing has been officially decided as yet.

Chair: Given that this is not an official appointment as yet, and therefore there is no specific thing to respond to, does anyone have any immediate questions on this, before we get on to the meat of this afternoon's session? Mr Stringer, you start and then I will come on to Mr Bryant.

Q59 **Graham Stringer:** It is very good of you to be here this afternoon, Mr Abbott. I have two simple questions. If you were to take a position with the Board of Trade, would you need the Australian Government's permission to take that position? I agree with the points you made in your opening remarks, and I think most people would. One comment was attributed to you earlier is that "free trade is too important to leave to the officials." If that is a fair comment, could you give us some evidence on that and how it would affect your approach to being a member of the Board of Trade?



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Tony Abbott: If I may, I would be doing this as a private citizen and I do not imagine that there would be any requirement for Australian Government approval. That said, when there was this report in one of the London newspapers, my friend and colleague, Prime Minister Scott Morrison was asked about it, and he said it was a “good hire”, so I presume that is a general commendation, if I may say so.

On the other question, it is important that all things that are done in our name—and free trade agreements are negotiated by Governments in the name of the peoples of the relevant countries—have to be fully overseen by the elected and accountable Government and the elected and accountable Ministers. It is absolutely critical that that happens. That is not simply the case with free trade deals; it is obviously the case just at the moment with health regulations. Officials advise; Ministers decide. We can never put ourselves entirely into the hands of unelected and unaccountable people when it comes to very important decisions impacting dramatically on the daily lives of our citizens.

So, yes, officials have a very important part to play—in the big three free trade deals that my Government finalised, with China, Japan and South Korea, the officials were absolutely magnificent. They were driven, and sometimes driven hard by the then Australian Trade Minister, Andrew Robb, and certainly I did quite a bit myself to ensure that we did not get bogged down in a whole lot of technicalities. Nevertheless, I sometimes think that officials sometimes prefer the process to the outcome, but in the end the whole point of the process is to get the best possible outcome, often as quickly as you can.

Q60 **Chris Bryant:** Thanks very much, Mr Abbott, and it is good to have you with us. May I just check: what country are you in at the moment?

Tony Abbott: I am lucky enough to be in London just now.

Q61 **Chris Bryant:** How did you manage to get round the fact that the Australian health website said that Australia’s borders are closed?

Tony Abbott: You can get permission to leave the country and I applied in the ordinary way, through the website, providing the reasons why I wished to leave Australia for 10 days, and in due course permission was duly granted. I should point out that this is an entirely privately funded trip. When I go back to Australia, I would expect, like all incoming travellers, to be subjected to two weeks’ hotel quarantine, which, naturally enough, I will personally pay for.

Q62 **Chris Bryant:** It is just that there are a lot of British people who are still stuck in Australia and are not allowed to leave, so it feels a bit as if there is one rule for one set of people and another for others.

Tony Abbott: I would certainly be disappointed if that were ever the case. My understanding is that all people in Australia—well, certainly Australian citizens—who wish to leave have got to go through this process, the same process that I went through. My understanding is that people who are normally resident in other countries are generally permitted to leave; that



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is my understanding. You probably should seek further and better particulars from Australia House on that, but my understanding is that if you are a British subject, you can go, if you are normally resident in Britain—

Q63 **Chris Bryant:** You said that you have been in discussions about a job with Government Ministers here—

Tony Abbott: I think I would call it a role rather than a job.

Q64 **Chris Bryant:** What is the distinction that you are drawing? What is this role, then? Give it a title, give it a pay grade, give it a—

Tony Abbott: Again, I really think that that is something that is better addressed to Ministers in the Government. It is something that is not yet official and I really do not think there is anything more I can say until things have been decided.

Q65 **Chris Bryant:** Did they first approach you about this role, or did you see an advert in *The Guardian* or something?

Tony Abbott: I am just not going to go into this any further.

Q66 **Chris Bryant:** Do you know what status you would have? For instance, would you have a diplomatic passport? Would you be covered by the Vienna convention on diplomatic relations? Would you have dual citizenship or Australian citizenship only?

Tony Abbott: Again, I am not going to go into this any further, save to add two things. First, I do not normally read *The Guardian*; I am sure it is a wonderful newspaper, but it is not my staple reading. Secondly, as a former Australian Prime Minister, as luck would have it, I do have a diplomatic passport.

Chris Bryant: You keep that for life, do you, in Australia?

Tony Abbott: That is the rule in Australia, yes.

Chair: We are going off topic.

Q67 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Thank you for joining us, Mr Abbott. The policies that the Government decide to pursue are as important, I guess, as the people who join and run the Government. You said in March 2017 that, when it came to trade deals you had overseen, particularly with China, as Prime Minister, labour and environmental standards were “peripheral issues”. Will that be the approach you take in any future role you may have as a trade envoy of some kind with the British Government?

Tony Abbott: Obviously, if I was doing some work to advise and perhaps facilitate in this area, in the end decisions would be, as they quite properly should be, for the Minister, for the Government and perhaps for the Parliament, but I should—

Q68 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Do you believe they are peripheral issues? What do you think now?



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Tony Abbott: Certainly, in respect of the United Kingdom and Australia, labour standards and environmental standards are very comparable.

Q69 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Do you think they are peripheral issues, Mr Abbott, if you are negotiating, say, with China?

Tony Abbott: The point I make is that if, for argument's sake, you are talking about Australia and the United Kingdom, we have great respect for workers' rights, as we should. We certainly want to see a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, and I certainly want to see my country, and I am sure Britain as well, a high-wage society into the future. We have, I think, the very best of environmental standards—certainly our air quality, our water quality and our protection of flora and fauna in Australia are absolutely second to none, as I think they are here in Britain.

Q70 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Are you familiar with QAnon, Mr Abbott?

Tony Abbott: I'm afraid I am not, but I am sure you will enlighten me.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: It is a far-right conspiracy theorist group. I am curious why, this morning, in a speech you gave here in London, you used their language when you referred to a "health dictatorship". Why did you use that term, and what exactly is a health dictatorship?

Tony Abbott: The reference was to the situation currently pertaining in the Australian state of Victoria where, under a series of emergency and disaster declarations, homes can be entered at any time, persons detained at any time and the ordinary law of the land suspended, without further reference to Parliament. These are very draconian restrictions. They are being put in place—

Q71 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** To save lives, presumably.

Tony Abbott: For our own good, in the judgment of the Victorian Premier and the Victorian Government, but they are very draconian restrictions. However—

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I suppose I just hope you do not add healthcare to the list of peripheral issues.

Q72 **Chair:** Order. I am going to stop that there. Forgive me; frankly I do not see the relevance to the work of the Foreign Affairs Committee on that. Mr Abbott has kindly agreed to speak on wider issues.

Tony Abbott: It brings back happy memories to see this kind of banter across the parliamentary Chamber floor.

Chair: I don't think you need any protecting, Mr Abbott, frankly—you have been through the rough and tumble more than most. Can I get back to what you were invited to speak about, which was multinational diplomacy?

Claudia Webbe: Is it possible to come in there, Tom?

Chair: Very briefly, Ms Webbe, if it really is specific to the role of the Foreign Affairs Committee and not something on a wider issue that Mr



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Abbott really isn't here to answer for.

- Q73 **Claudia Webbe:** It is an important question. Welcome, Mr Abbott. In 2012, you said that men are by physiology or temperament more adapted than women to exercise authority or to issue command. Can you tell us whether you stand by that view, and will you have any difficulty accepting the authority of Liz Truss if you are working under her command at the Board of Trade?

Tony Abbott: I am not sure I ever did say that. If you would like to privately provide the Committee secretariat with your source, I would happily have a look at it, but it does not sound like anything I have said.

- Q74 **Chair:** Could we move on, please, and focus on what we actually need to ask about? I will begin, if I may.

We recognise there is a fine line between legitimate influence and unacceptable interference leading to abuse or misuse by member states within multilaterals. What vulnerabilities to abuse and misuse do you recognise in particular multilaterals at the current time? I am particularly thinking of some of the examples that your successor Government, Mr Morrison's Government, has called out in things like the World Health Organisation. What other issues can you think of where the multilateral system is vulnerable?

Tony Abbott: The multilateral system is there for very good reasons. It has evolved as part of the post-war settlement, which was essentially authored by the United States and the United Kingdom, and its underpinnings are the underpinnings that we would all respect and support—the free and equal association of sovereign states, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and so on. I am broadly supportive of the multilateral system. I just make this observation, though: the strength, freedom, fairness and cohesion of countries such as Australia and, I am sure, the United Kingdom do not depend on those multilateral entities. Given that the multilateral entities are often dominated by countries with quite different standards, I would like to see countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and other like-minded countries playing a strong role in them, but in the end it is our standards, our ways and our values that we have to act by. That would be my general observation.

The point to be made about the World Health Organisation is that it does seem, on the basis of information that has been widely circulated, that the Chinese authorities first tried to repress information coming out of Wuhan, including information that was being circulated on Chinese social media; second, were slow to inform the World Health Organisation of exactly what was going on; and third, have resisted any attempts to get them to come clean about what exactly happened that has given us this dreadful scourge. This is not so much criticism of the World Health Organisation as some observations about the sorts of things that are all too common in authoritarian countries. Nevertheless, it is important that where something deeply sub-optimal has happened, countries such as Australia and Britain call out other countries in these forums. Obviously, it was something of a diplomatic coup by the Morrison Government to have secured World



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Health Organisation agreement to this comprehensive investigation into the outbreak of the coronavirus. Let's hope that China co-operates fully with that inquiry.

- Q75 **Henry Smith:** Welcome, Mr Abbott. It is good to have you in front of us today. You are quite right to say that it was a significant achievement of the current Australian Government to get that review, and I suspect it will find, as you have alluded to, that there was a cover-up by the Chinese regime in Beijing over the seriousness of the early stages of what became the covid-19 pandemic. This Committee has produced a report on reform of global health. Do you think that, subject to this review, it may well be that the World Health Organisation needs to be significantly reformed so that it is not so subject to political interference, or that a new body— particularly between countries that are not dictatorships among the democracies—could be formed?

Tony Abbott: I think there should be the strongest possible co-operation between like-minded democracies. As far as is humanly possible, the best standards should be applicable to the workings of these multinational entities. I would certainly encourage the Governments of Britain, Australia and other like-minded, pluralist democracies around the world to put their heads together on what would be a suitable range of reforms for the World Health Organisation. Let's hope at least some of those might be adopted. I would have thought that the biggest practical difficulty is the lack of ability of the World Health Organisation to send inspectors into countries where there are apparent problems, to get quickly to the bottom of what might be going on. I imagine that there might be some resistance to any such proposal from some Governments, but an effective World Health Organisation really does need the power to get down on the ground and to see exactly what is happening, so that you are not as reliant on reports from Governments that may have a vested interest in minimising problems or even covering them up.

Chair: Do you want to come back on that, Henry?

Henry Smith: No, that was comprehensive. My appreciation.

- Q76 **Royston Smith:** Thank you for joining us today, Mr Abbott. We are all very grateful to you, and I am sorry we went a bit off piste to start with. I want to bring it back to the reasons that you are here. Which multilaterals do you see as key in the coming years, and what do you see as the UK's role in driving change within them?

Tony Abbott: All of them have an important role. I was looking through the list of multilateral organisations to which Britain is a member and a key contributor, and it's a pretty impressive list. There was the World Health Organisation—around £20 million a year. There was NATO—around £380 million a year. There was the Council of Europe—around £30 million a year. I presume that won't have to be spent come next year. Then there was the Commonwealth, with just £6 million or £7 million a year, which was a little surprising and a little disappointing. I know the Commonwealth is a large and at times unwieldy entity, but it is nevertheless an entity that



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owes its origin to Britain's global role. Without wanting to pump up the Commonwealth's tyres too much, it did surprise me a little that the contribution, and presumably therefore the emphasis that Britain places on so many other organisations, so far exceeded the Commonwealth.

Q77 Andrew Rosindell: Good afternoon, Mr Abbott. Welcome to our meeting. Thank you for your friendship to the United Kingdom over many years. We appreciate everything you are doing to support us during this transition period, as we leave the European Union, and we hope you will work with us in the future.

You will know that the new Leader of the Opposition in Canada, Mr Erin O'Toole, said: "we fought and died together. We need to do more with our best friends on the world stage". Would you agree with that? Do you think that Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand—all the English-speaking countries—have so much in common and should work together in many areas and seize the opportunities that we have, now that Britain has left the European Union?

Tony Abbott: I would, and I suppose the Five Eyes partnership has been a wonderful, practical example of all the major English-speaking democracies working together for the good of the wider world throughout the post-war period. If anything, the Five Eyes partnership has become even more important in recent years than it has been at times over the last seven decades. I do think it is very important.

I should probably say, though, that while I think the Anglosphere countries can and should work in the closest possible harmony—whatever juridical differences there are between us, in practical terms we are family—I would not want other like-minded democracies to feel excluded. Countries such as Japan, Singapore and Israel, for instance, are not Anglosphere countries but have strategic skin in the game and are extremely like-minded with the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and other countries.

Q78 Andrew Rosindell: On that very point, as you arrived at Heathrow, you would have seen for the first time the flags of Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Japan. That is a great indication of how Britain is changing its attitude and becoming more global, not just Eurocentric. Would you agree with the position of the Government here in the UK that we need a clean break from the European Union, and that to trade and co-operate globally we need to be independent of their tentacles and their control? Would you support that view? If so, do you feel that we have many more opportunities to work within the Commonwealth family and the wider world, as you have just mentioned?

Tony Abbott: I would probably not use the same terminology, with respect, but I certainly think that Britain should not fear a so-called hard exit. Australia has been, for many years, doing what is currently \$100 billion-worth of trade annually with countries of the EU on a no-deal basis. Britain currently does a shade over 50% of its trade with countries outside the EU on a no-deal basis. I certainly hope that the EU comes to its senses and offers Britain at least a Canada-style free trade deal. I certainly hope



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that is the case, but no one in Britain should be too angst-ridden about a so-called hard Brexit, because Britain is already doing so much on a no-deal basis anyway.

The other point that I hope you will forgive me for making in this context is that if you look at the modern world, no country has made as great a contribution as these islands. The world's common language, parliamentary democracy, the industrial revolution, the emancipation of minorities—all this originated here in Great Britain. That is something that you should be incredibly proud of. Certainly, as part of the wider English-speaking family, I am very conscious of it, and I have to say that I am very grateful for it. That is, I suppose, why most Australians gave a cheer—some louder than others, but most Australians cheered mightily—when Britons voted back in 2016 to look to the wider world as much as they look to their friends and near neighbours in Europe.

- Q79 **Andrew Rosindell:** On that point, how important do you think the link is that Australia and Britain have—indeed, Canada and New Zealand and others have—in terms of the importance of the monarchy that binds us together as nation states?

Tony Abbott: I think it is an important link. I think it is more than merely symbolic, although it certainly is a very powerful symbol; but if you look at the actual governance arrangements within Australia, the fact that our Head of State, the Governor General, represents the Crown, is an important reality in the delicate balancing act between the different arms of Government. If we were ever to move to a different constitutional arrangement I suspect that the relationship between the Head of State and the Head of Government would alter in favour of the Head of State, and I am not sure that would be a good thing. I know, in my country, arguments have raged now for the best part of 30 years about whether we should change, and the point I have always made is we don't have any real problems in Australia that would be improved by ditching the Crown. I certainly think that there are some issues that potentially, at least, could be made more fraught if we did.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Abbott. On questions of ditching the Crown, Mr McDonald, you wanted to come in on a separate issue.

- Q80 **Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** I think you are calling me a queen, there, Chairman.

Mr Abbott, thank you for your contribution so far. Can I shift to Five Eyes? Do you think Five Eyes would benefit from growing in membership?

Tony Abbott: This is a very good question, and as Prime Minister I certainly wanted to foster closer intelligence and security links with like-minded democracies that had skin in the strategic game. Again, I would cite Japan, Singapore, Israel and maybe, down the track, even India. I am not sure that we could really in any near term bring others into Five Eyes without possibly weakening it, but I certainly would like to see—myself, I think it would be an improvement if we had—if you like, a Five Eyes plus, where best endeavours were made to develop the same level of strategic



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and security intimacy, the same level of familiarity at all ranks of our defence and security and intelligence organisations, between some of those other like-minded democracies, as has existed for decades between the Five Eyes countries.

Q81 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I understand why you mention some of the countries that you mentioned, given that you are a former Prime Minister of Australia. Have you given any thought to any European nations that could add something to Five Eyes or a hypothetical Five Eyes plus?

Tony Abbott: Obviously, there is the NATO alliance, which has been critical in protecting Europe in the period from 1949 until the collapse of the Berlin wall and the break-up of the old Soviet Union, and is still very significant in terms of trying to ensure that Russian aggression is adequately countered. I think it is important that NATO remains strong. I guess I would stress not just like-minded, but countries that have got a lot of strategic skin in the game. I would certainly think of countries like Japan, in the sorts of—when I think of the world that we are likely to live in over the next few decades I think Japan is an absolutely critical member of the Western alliance. I certainly would want to see the closest possible defence, security and intelligence co-operation with Japan.

Q82 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Thinking of where the United Kingdom is on the map, we have defence and security agreements and co-operation with countries such as the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, given the importance of the high north, the Icelandic gap and the security situation there. Could you see any scope for, say, Norway joining Five Eyes or the Five Eyes plus kind of outfit that you mentioned?

Tony Abbott: I have never really had any dealings with the defence and intelligence communities of countries such as Norway, so I probably best not comment on that. The difficulty with a lot of the European countries, including a great country like Germany, is that they have let their military capacity wither to a very great extent. Even the Netherlands has let its military capacity wither. I am not sure that is very sensible in a world which is becoming less secure, not more secure and is likely to become considerably less secure still in the years and decades to come.

If we are talking about Five Eyes plus, yes, like-minded democracies with the very best values, but also a commitment to strengthening their military and security capabilities rather than letting them wither, are important.

Q83 Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I would agree with part of that. A country like Denmark, for example, has recently just about trebled its spending on defence and is famous for its capability in special forces. It has that skin in the game that you mentioned. Given how important our region of the world is, I am curious to get your thoughts, if an expansion were to happen, could it or would it include a nation in that part of the world that has an interest in the high north, the Icelandic gap, et cetera?



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Tony Abbott: The one point I want to make is that, given the extraordinary contribution that the Five Eyes relationship has made to the security and freedom of the wider world over 70 years, I would not want to do anything to dilute it. I am in favour of strengthening it, and Five Eyes plus may well do that, but nothing should be done that ends up diluting it.

Rather than water down the Five Eyes relationship, I would like to see an attempt to build up something like the Five Eyes relationship with like-minded democracies with skin in the game. I don't know the Danish situation well enough to make any observation at all about it.

- Q84 **Bob Seely:** Mr Abbott, thank you for being here. Two questions, if I may, first about CANZUK and secondly about global defence. As I understand it, New Zealand and Australia have very close trading relationships and travel arrangements between their people and their businesses and they are among the closest of any two nations on earth. Looking at CANZUK—Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom—is the Australia-New Zealand relationship a model that can be broadened out to include countries like Canada and the United Kingdom, or do you think that begins to be a bit too problematic?

Tony Abbott: In principle, I would not have any problem with it at all. I would applaud it in principle. I would be enthusiastically in favour of it in principle because, if you are looking at the Australia-New Zealand relationship, it is just about as close as any two countries can be while retaining full independent sovereignty. I often say of New Zealand, and indeed of the United Kingdom as well, that they may be foreign countries juridically, but in every meaningful sense, they are family.

I suppose the important thing is to do your best to convert that family feeling into the most advantageous possible arrangements where the citizens of countries can add to each other and in so doing add to themselves. That is important. If, for argument's sake, the British Government and the Australian Government wanted to do a free trade deal that was as good as the trans-Tasman partnership, that would be wonderful. The starting point, as I said earlier, would be no tariffs or quotas on goods, full mutual recognition of standards and credentials, and free-ish movement of people for work not welfare. The more the people of Britain and Australia know and trust each other, the better for everyone.

- Q85 **Bob Seely:** You talked to us about Five Eyes, which is intelligence sharing. Australia is not part of NATO. Do you think we need a global NATO? In the cold war, NATO was very much focused on the north Atlantic and the defence of Europe. Now that you have two significant authoritarian states in the world—Russia with a small economy and lots of nukes, and China with a very big economy, much more powerful, a much more significant threat in many ways—do you think we need a global NATO to act as a defence of democracy globally?

Tony Abbott: You say, Bob, that Australia is not a member of NATO and that is true. We have got observer status at NATO meetings and Australian



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Prime Ministers have been to some of those meetings. We participated in the NATO-auspiced work in Afghanistan for many years. We have very close understandings with the main NATO partners, which means that Australia would be a practical member of NATO if there were any need for a NATO operation, as there was in Afghanistan. Again, without wanting to be too prescriptive in terms of structures, what we want is the closest possible comradeship—the closest possible co-operation, collegiality—between the like-minded democracies with strategic skin in the game. That is what I think we should work towards. It is interesting that the Australian Treasurer, who I guess is the equivalent of your Chancellor of the Exchequer, has recently begun Five Eyes teleconferences—Zoom conferences in this era—to talk about the economic response to the pandemic. I certainly think that many areas of government could benefit from a Five Eyes perspective.

- Q86 **Bob Seely:** Finally, just on your attitude to free trade agreements. If one were striking a free trade agreement, theoretically, with a country such as China, to what extent does one say free trade is good in itself? Or to what extent do you think that when striking a free trade deal you look at forced labour, slave labour, human rights abuses or a mercantilist economy that seeks to use trade as a weapon? Where do you find that balance in how you assess the worth of a free trade agreement and free trade with other countries?

Tony Abbott: This is a good point you make. You are driving at an important issue here. While freer trade is in the long run beneficial for the world, in the short run, freer trade can often be better for relatively poorer countries than for relatively richer countries. Freer trade can often involve an element of equalisation. Sometimes that can be equalising the rich down as well as the poor up. That is all very well in the global context, but if you are a citizen of a richer country, particularly a citizen of a richer country working in a vulnerable industry, that is something that you are entitled to have some reservations about.

I thought, when I was in the position of trying to finalise the free trade deal with China, that it was more problematic than the deals we were also finalising with Japan and South Korea, which are both robust democracies with pretty damn good standards wherever you care to look. But at that stage, we were not nearly as conscious as we now are of the incipient direction of China under its current leadership.

We were not aware to the extent that we are now of what was happening with the Uyghurs, or of this social credit system—the Orwellian system of surveillance and high tech-enabled conformism. There had not been an abrogation of the one country, two systems treaty in Hong Kong. The threats against Taiwan were not nearly as high-octane as they have become. The militarisation of the South China Sea had not really started. The bullying of other neighbours—even India—was not really happening. Maybe we were looking at China through overly rose-coloured glasses back then, but we are certainly not now. I think that there are considerations that would have to be taken into effect now that were probably less pressing back then.



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I should probably conclude this set of observations by pointing out that our free trade deal with China has been, I think, at least as beneficial for Australia as it has been for China. Our exports to China in the period of the free trade deal's operation have gone up by 15%; China's exports to us have gone up by only about 7%. This is one of those free trade deals between a relatively richer and a relatively poorer country that has been good for both, rather than being as one-sided as some of them might sometimes have seemed when looked at in retrospect.

- Q87 Graham Stringer:** I have two questions, with one following on from that. Would you have concluded the free trade deal with China if you believed them to be carrying out genocide against the Uyghurs?

Tony Abbott: I certainly have no reason to think that horrific things are not happening. It seems that there are something like 1 million Uyghurs in what look horribly like concentration camps, which is absolutely dreadful, abominable, appalling. The treatment of minorities in China is appalling—no doubt about that—but we did not know then what we know now. I would probably rather not answer a hypothetical question, given that we made decisions back then based on what we knew back then.

- Q88 Graham Stringer:** Thanks. On a completely different point, I go back to what you were saying before about Australia's relationship with NATO and some European countries not spending very much on defence. There were many reasons that people wanted the United Kingdom to leave the European Union. For David Owen, a previous Labour Foreign Secretary, his main reason was that he believed that the European Union wanted to set up its own defence force, which would mean that there were two centres of control for defending Europe, which he thought would be catastrophic. Do you have a view on that, and would you agree with him?

Tony Abbott: David Owen was an impressive Foreign Secretary who showed a lot of political courage at different times in his public life. I am not as familiar as I am sure he was with specific proposals coming out of Europe for a European army. But if I were a Briton, I would absolutely expect British armed forces to be capable, powerful, global and under the absolute control of the British Government. Certainly, you would look long and hard and pretty askance at any proposal for Australia to be in some way dependent upon a multinational force.

- Q89 Alicia Kearns:** Mr Abbott, I want to ask you about the defence and resilience of multinational organisations. China and Australia are engaged in what we might call tough diplomatic engagements in a number of multilateral organisations where the two nations are not at common purpose. How do you think the UK can support like-minded countries such as Australia to strengthen the international rules-based order and make sure those multilaterals do not come under attack?

Tony Abbott: Obviously, where there is a problem—where, for argument's sake, Australia or the United Kingdom thinks there is a problem—you would probably in the first instance go to the countries that are most like-minded to see whether they share your view. If there is something like a consensus among like-minded countries, you would then



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go and talk to other countries and see if you can come to a position that is capable of bringing about meaningful change for the better. So I guess you would just do the ordinary kind of coalition and bridge building, but I stress that effective coalition building does not start from some mythical middle ground. It starts from having a very strong set of values, a good analysis of the particular problem, and a credible and practical way forward. If you have got a credible and practical way forward, based on good values, that is where you start to make real progress.

Q90 Alicia Kearns: During your premiership, were there multilaterals that you were particularly concerned about that were under specific hostile attack or where there were attempts to undermine them?

Tony Abbott: I was probably more concerned in my time with working with like-minded countries on issues such as the Islamist threat in the Middle East; working effectively to ensure that the people-smuggling problem to Australia's north was halted, and halted for good; and working with countries that were not particularly like-minded, such as China, on issues where we had a common interest, such as trying to figure out the riddle of MH370, the missing flight that still has not been located over six years later. So that was my particular concern. I guess all of it was based on a clear appreciation of our values and interests and a desire to work wherever possible with other countries towards clear and practical outcomes. You have always got to know what the problem is and what is a reasonable solution. If you have done that, you can go out and try to recruit others to the cause.

Q91 Alicia Kearns: My final question: talking about coalitions and shared outcomes, as nations who are passionate about human rights, how do we prevent atrocities when they are being perpetrated by superpowers? This is not something that Western nations have ever had to face in the past. As you and I have said, there is a genocide taking place in Xinjiang province. How do we tackle them when it is a superpower itself committing these atrocities?

Tony Abbott: This is a very good question. It is much more relevant for European countries and America, where the individuals concerned have got interests, but my understanding is that specifically targeted Magnitsky-style sanctions have been applied to a number of high ranking people in Russia, who have been highly involved in the illegal occupation of the Crimea and the proxy invasion of the eastern Ukraine. I think that is the most prospective way forward when it comes to dealing with atrocities by very powerful states against their own people.

If, as we fear, freedom is being slowly strangled in Hong Kong, quite apart from the atrocities being perpetrated against the Uyghurs, it would be absolutely appropriate to apply Magnitsky-style sanctions against the senior leadership in Beijing. Because, let's face it, whatever they are doing in Hong Kong or in Xinjiang province, a lot of them want to do shopping trips to London, to have bank accounts in Switzerland and the United Kingdom and to send their kids to Western universities, and that is something that cannot be business as usual if what you are doing is

absolutely horrific towards your own people, or towards people who you have promised to treat well.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you. I very much hope that in the near future we will see UK sanctions against those perpetrating appalling acts of cruelty against the Uyghur.

Chair: This is a subject that has drawn quite a lot of the Committee's attention, as you know. Dirty money passing through London is something that we have put quite a lot of time—

Tony Abbott: I understand. Now, Tom, it is now four o'clock and I am going to have to vanish, but can I just say how much I appreciate the opportunity to talk to the Committee? It has been quite an interesting discussion, with a bit of lively banter and partisan sparring early on, but I hope all of us have learnt something from it.

Q92 **Chair:** May I ask one final question?

Tony Abbott: Sure.

Q93 **Chair:** You were instrumental in the negotiations for the CPTPP, and I would be interested in your views on Britain's place in it, as a new multilateral organisation, and in its place in the world.

Tony Abbott: I am confident that Australia and Japan would look very kindly towards any British application to accede to the trans-Pacific partnership. Certainly, I know that free trade negotiations between Australia and Britain—and I think those with Japan as well—are very well advanced. In terms of global Britain, I think membership of the trans-Pacific partnership would be a great boon to the wider world. Let's not forget that the trans-Pacific partnership was originally conceived by the Obama Administration as the economic arm of the strategic tilt to Asia, so to speak. If Britain were to come into the trans-Pacific partnership, that would be, I suppose, a British tilt to Asia, which Britain should welcome and which the people of the Asia-Pacific, or the Indo-Pacific as we sometimes call it, should also welcome. It is a bit like home porting HMS Queen Elizabeth in Singapore or some such place. I think it would be a wonderful contribution to global stability.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. I know many of us would welcome that outreach. Can I thank you very much indeed for your agreement to participate and for taking every question in good spirit? I am particularly grateful for your contribution. May I also add my own thanks for the support you have given the United Kingdom over many years, but particularly over the last four years?

Tony Abbott: Good on you, Tom. And thank you to Committee members.

Chair: On that note, I will close the sitting.